

EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK

The Opium War's Secret History

By KARL E. MEYER

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Losers rarely name wars, an exception being the conflict between Britain and China from 1839 to 1842, known bluntly ever since as the Opium War. To most Chinese, a century of humiliation began with this war, in which Westerners sought to force a deadly drug on an Asian people, and then imposed an unequal treaty that pried open their country and annexed the island that became Hong Kong.

In embarrassing truth, that is essentially what happened. As Hong Kong reverts to China at month's end, many of us for the first time may see a bit of history from a different end of the telescope. Yet a further point needs making. Even the authors of the Opium War were ashamed of it, and Western protests against it marked the beginning of a concern with international human rights that in a fresh turn embarrasses today's leaders in Beijing.

Along with the slave trade, the traffic in opium was the dirty underside of an evolving global trading economy. In America as in Europe, pretty much everything was deemed fair in the pursuit of profits. Such was the outlook at Russell & Company, a Boston concern whose clipper ships made it the leader in the lucrative American trade in Chinese tea and silk.

In 1823 a 24-year-old Yankee, Warren Delano, sailed to Canton, where he did so well that within seven years he was a senior partner in Russell & Company. Delano's problem, as with all traders, European and American, was that China had much to sell but declined to buy. The Manchu emperors believed that the Middle Kingdom already possessed everything worth having, and hence needed no barbarian manufactures.

The British struck upon an ingenious way to reduce a huge trade deficit. Their merchants bribed Chinese officials to allow entry of chests of opium from British-ruled India, though its importation had long been banned by imperial decree. Imports soared, and nearly every American company followed suit, acquiring "black dirt" in Turkey or as agents for Indian producers.

Writing home, Delano said he could not pretend to justify the opium trade on moral grounds, "but as a merchant I insist it has been . . . fair, honorable and legitimate," and no more objectionable than the importation of wines and spirits to the U.S. Yet as addiction became epidemic, and as the Chinese began paying with precious silver for the drug, their Emperor finally in 1839 named an Imperial Commissioner to end the trade.

Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu proceeded to Canton, seized vast stocks of opium and dumped the chests in the sea. This, plus a melee in which drunken sailors killed a Chinese villager, furnished the spark for the Opium War, initiated by Lord Palmerston, the British Prime Minister, and waged with determination to obtain full compensation for the opium. The Celestial Empire was humbled, forced to open five ports to foreign traders and to permit a British colony at Hong Kong.

But as noteworthy, the war was denounced in Parliament as "unjust and iniquitous" by 30-year-old William Ewart Gladstone, who accused Palmerston of hoisting the British flag "to protect an infamous contraband traffic." The same outrage was expressed in the pulpit and the press, in America and England, thereby encouraging Russell & Company and most other American businesses to pull out of the opium trade.

Warren Delano returned to America rich, and in 1851 settled in Newburgh, N.Y. There he eventually gave his daughter Sara in marriage to a well-born neighbor, James Roosevelt, the father of Franklin Roosevelt. The old China trader was close-mouthed about opium, as

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were his partners in Russell & Company. It is not clear how much F.D.R. knew about this source of his grandfather's wealth. But the President's recent biographer Geoffrey Ward rejects efforts by the Delano family to minimize Warren's involvement.

The family's discomfort is understandable. We no longer believe that anything goes in the global marketplace, regardless of social consequences. It is precisely this conviction that underlies efforts to attach human rights conditions to trading relations -- to temper the amorality of the market -- a point that, alas, seems to elude the Socialist soon-to-be masters of Hong Kong. KARL E. MEYER

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